A PARTISAN GOD

December 15, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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"He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud...and exalted those of low degree." -- Luke 1:51, 52 (RSV)

Scripture

Psalm 9:1-10
Isaiah 12:1-6
Luke 1:39-57

A story is told about the late Paul Tillich, probably apocryphal. One of the most important theologians of the century, Tillich was not known for simplicity. He used to define faith as "ultimate concern." One time, after a public lecture -- or so the story goes -- an elderly gentleman approached the distinguished scholar and said: "Dr. Tillich, I appreciate knowing that faith is ultimate concern. But what I really want to know is this -- Is the ultimate concerned about me?"

In the history of remarkable ideas, there is none more astonishing than this -- God cares. We are much more comfortable discussing and thinking about God in the objective, remote language of the classroom. We can find room in our intellect for a God who is the "first cause" among all causes, we can be tantalized by the Tillichian constructs of God as the "ground of being," "being as such," or even the concept of God's "wholly otherness." And then comes Advent with its soft greens and royal purples and winsome music: its blatant tugging at our hearts, and its invitation to open the windows of our souls, and behind it all is the remarkable suggestion that God cares, that the "first cause" and "ground of being" is actually better described in parental terms; that God loves, in fact, and that when it comes to individual human beings and the whole lot of us together, the human family, God hovers and fusses and tends and cares and loves like a mother or father, and is a very particular partisan.

In the history of remarkable ideas, that wins the prize. It is a particularly Hebraic suggestion in its earliest evolution. That God has a heart, that God can't resist responding to human need, that God always favors the underdog and gives special attention to the weak, the poor, the excluded, is a Jewish contribution to the catalog of remarkable ideas. The dieties of ancient people were, at best, ambivalent about the human condition. The person who wanted some attention, some redress of wrong, had to pound away at the heavenly door as it were, or offer up some compellingly persuasive sacrifice, just to get a day in court. That pagan notion lives on in the idea that if we can just get enough people praying for something, we will achieve a critical mass and be irresistably persuasive to God who will then be galvanized into

action and do something he would not be inclined to do if left to his own initiative. I do believe prayer is a marvelous conduit of God's healing love, but find fairly pagan the suggestion that God will miraculously heal a youngster for whom thousands of people are praying, but ignore the child dying of malnutrition in a ghetto, for whom no one is praying because no one knows his name. In fact, it is part of the remarkable suggestion of Advent that that child has God's undivided attention.

The Hebrews, when they reflected on their experience as slaves in Egypt and their unlikely deliverance, told about Jahweh, the God who could hear their groaning, who threw in on their side and helped them get out of there. The really amazing part of the story is not that they beat the Egyptian army across a muddy swamp called the Sea of Reeds, but that the God of the Bible is a partisan who has compassion, who hears the cries of the oppressed, who throws in on their side of the outsiders, who comes particularly to be with those who know they are in need. "The Lord takes pleasure in his people," the Psalmist wrote: "He adorns the humble -- the poor ones -- with victory." (Psalm 149:4) These words have brought life to God's people living in the shadow of death -- in Egypt -- in American slavery, in concentration camps, -- in South African homelands.

The anomaly in the Bible, therefore, the ones who miss the point, are the ones who think they don't need God because they don't seem to be in trouble. The Bible uses a series of catch terms to describe them: words like "the proud, the mighty, the vain." Often it is those who are influential, powerful, wealthy, who seem to miss the point and who end up on the outside of the Biblical picture.

I read a remarkable statistic last week. Two-thirds of the people who lived in the Roman Empire were regarded as slaves "able to be sold, punished or killed at the whim of their owners or Roman masters." (John Stroman, Christian Century, 12/11/85, P.1142) In Palastine, where Roman Legions occupied the streets, and the economy was pressed into Roman service and terrible poverty was exacerbated by Roman taxation, God's partisanship for oppressed people was a powerful and hopeful and life-giving idea.

So it is that Luke, with his uniquely human perspective and his strong social conscience, begins his Gospel with a story of a Galilean peasant girl visiting her older cousin Elizabeth and describing her pregnancy in a powerful hymn which used very partisan language. "He has scattered the proud," Mary said. "He has put down the mighty, he has filled the hungry with good things, the rich he has sent empty away." No text causes the preacher and the congregation as much distress as this one...it requires careful attention and unusual openness.

Artists have painted the meeting between young Mary and Elizabeth beautifully; Johann Sebastian Bach set Mary's words on the occasion to some of the greatest music ever written -- The Magnificat, Mary's Hymn, "My soul magnifies the Lord" is great poetry which some scholars believe was used liturgically in the early Christian Church, which, in fact, was on the outside looking in, an underdog operation and which felt the oppressive, suffocating power of Roman authority. It contains a clear articulation of God's partisanship. It's no wonder King Herod decided to try to eliminate the baby, with his

mother talking about God's "scattering the proud and pulling the mighty from their thrones."

Henry Nouwen reported in his journal that several years ago the words of Mary's Magnificat were considered subversive in El Salvador and could lead to torture or death (Gracias, P.168) It is impossible for the poor not to read themselves into this text, and to regard this disturbing hymn as a call for revolution. In fact, the Virgin Mary is adored with particular devotion in countries where poverty and political oppression are the norm. Nouwen - a Dutch Jesuit who teaches at Yale, reports that he was helped "to see Mary through the eyes of poor people of the third world... Mary knew what oppression was when she didn't find a place to give birth... She knew the suffering of mothers who see their children die...she felt the lonliness of the widow and the agony of seeing her son being executed... Indeed, Mary is the woman who stands next to all the poor, oppressed and lonely women of our time." (Ibid, P.67) You and I have to work at it, but we must understand, it seems to me, that most of the people in the world are poor, that most of the people in our world live in societies that are repressive, or at least significantly less free than our own. To hear this text in Advent means trying to comprehend how it must sound to people who are poor, hungry and for whom the word "freedom" has very little content other than the constant anxiety about where the next meal will come from.

Much of the theology being written today makes us uncomfortable. It is called Liberation Theology. The Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome recently was obviously uncomfortable with it, but had to deal with it. Sometimes it sounds like Marxism. Sometimes that is what it is. And sometimes it is a desperate and honest attempt to faithful Christian people to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into dialogue with their culture. If your child just died of hunger; or if your brother just disappeared in the middle of the night; or if you just lost your job because you attended the wrong meeting; or if the election was just cancelled and the newspaper shut down by government troops -- you might hear the Magnificat differently. The continuing tragedy in the Third World is that we who know better than anyone about liberty and human dignity end up trying to fight communism by supporting repression and in the process concede the struggle by default to the people who, ultimately, don't know much about human dignity and almost nothing about freedom.

How, then, to hear the Magnificat of Mary, in Chicago, today, in this place?

"We can't resign from the middle class." Harvey Cox, a Harvard professor said that, by the way. Cox likes liberation theology, but is honest enough to acknowledge that he is who he is, namely a comfortable teacher at a very comfortable institution. Guilt over who we are is not helpful.

We can choose not to hear at all, of course, to pretend that Mary didn't say it, or Luke didn't report that Mary said it; or conclude that some first century revolutionary probably made it up and inserted it in what was obviously a social visit between cousins. It is a bit of a homiletical tradition, in fact, to avoid this text: it stirs up the underprivileged and

angers the overprivileged and neither one of those alternatives makes for a quiet holiday for the preacher.

We can, on the other hand, acknowledge that at the heart of the faith, indeed its earliest tradition, is the conviction that God cares. "We can acknowledge that we live in a world that is not fair, that we have been born into a society incredibly blessed with both resources and freedom, and that it is part of God's agenda that we who have been given are to feel the responsibility for those who have nothing.

The Gospel of Christ is not a "Five Year Plan for Redistributing the Wealth" although there is not a thoughtful person in the world today who does not know that we simply must find a way to stop the widening gap between the minority of us who have and the majority who do not. A world divided between the very few who are wealthy and the very many who are poor is an intolerably dangerous place.

The Gospel of Christ is miscast as either an exclusively political program or simply spiritual discipline. It is more than either of those. It is God's word to us in our wholeness as human beings and if we listen intently, with everything in us, we will hear it.

What the Gospel of Christ has a way of doing is pressing us to look honestly at ourselves: annoying us by identifying some of the myths and half truths by which we choose to live. What the Gospel has an irritating way of doing is revealing who we are and what we are choosing to do with our lives and how we are actually living, intentionally or unintentionally.

I would submit that one of the things the Gospel of Christ does best is reveal that we are not as comfortable, as well off, as we like to think we are. Left to our own devices we might be inclined actually to define our humanity in terms of the BMW commercial, or the slick ads that propose that we have arrived when we can afford Chevas Regal. The artists, the poets, the writers, through whom God sneaks up on us, however, puncture the myths. The Wasteland, T. S. Eliot called the culture that would define us in terms of the cars we drive and the scotch we drink. Erich Fromm, in the classic, The Art of Loving wrote: "Happiness today consists in having fun." "Having fun lies in the satisfaction of consuming. The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, we are the eternally hopeful ones -- and the eternally disappointed ones." (P. 73) Gertrude Stein put it this way. "When we get there there is no one there." Simone de Beauvior, Jean Paul Sartre's companion, wrote in her memoirs, "I think with sadness of all the books I have read, all the places I have seen, all the knowledge I have amassed. The promises have all been kept. And yet I realize with stupor how much I was gypped." (See Hans Küng, Does God Exist, P.693) John Steinbeck, thinking about it all -- the promise of fulfillment, the allure of success, power, wealth, and how it as a way of turning sour, of never being enough, and that awful moment when we realize it, called it The Winter of Our Discontent.

Mary's hymn contains a saving word of God, particularly to people who think like that, and live in that kind of world. It is a word about poverty and neediness and vulnerability. You can't receive a gift unless you have some room in

your life for the gift. You can't receive a gift unless there is a sense in which you need the gift, are capable of being delighted and pleased with the gift. You can't learn anything if you already know it all. The miracle of learning happens somewhere close to humility -- vulnerability -- the acknowledgement of ignorance. You can't enjoy a world of beauty out there apart from the acknowledgement that there is beauty and truth which you can never own and will always need. You cannot be passionately and ecstatically in love with someone so full of himself or herself, so sufficient, that there is no need for your love to touch and no emptiness for your love to fill.

The trouble with the mighty, you see -- by Biblical lights and Mary's rhetoric -- is not their might, or power or even their wealth. It's the pride: the sense that they have what they need. The trouble with mighty people in the Bible is that they think they don't need a gift, don't know what in the world to do with a gift and that's what God's love is. It is not ultimately a matter of economics. Pride is indiscriminate. Sin is original. Graciousness, receptiveness, humility come at all income levels.

The word is that God cares deeply, is partisan toward his creation. The word is that God hears the cry of people who are excluded, oppressed -- in peasant shacks in the Third World and in condominiums in Chicago. God hears cries of people hungry for bread and hungry for love. God hears cries of pain in the hovels of South Africa and the mountain passes of Afghanistan and the Intensive Care Unit of the hospital down the street. God knows the grief of the loved ones whose sons and daughters, husbands, wives are dead in Gander. God hears and cares about loneliness and bitterness and despair and every winter of discontent.

God's partisanship meant divine vulnerability. The earliest objection to Christianity was precisely that God, if he is God, would not so lower himself. God's Messiah would never "come into the world without fitting honor and glory, would never be born of a woman who admitted that she was no more than a handmaid, a female slave." (Raymond E. Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, P. 364) God cares enough to have made himself vulnerable.

The Magnificat of Mary is an invitation to honest acknowledgement of our need. (That is why worship ordinarily begins with a prayer of confession -- an acknowledgment of incompleteness, of need for saving grace.) What is required in order to hear the Good News of the King who is coming is acknowledgement that all is not well, that we need the love of the God who created us.

A partisan God wants to save us from the hell of emptiness, by calling a deep and passionate love out of us. That's where the real poverty always is -- even in the midst of wealth. Those who need nothing -- love little, care little, risk little, and ultimately live little.

And that's where the liberation is, ultimately; the authentic joy and glorious Christmas laighter -- in a passionate caring for life, for the world, for one another; in a very partisan caring for the poor ones, the little ones, whoever they are. Philosopher Sam Keen writes: "If I answer the appeal to become a lover, it is no general essence of humankind I am called to love, but my self,

my children, my wife, my friend, my community, my land, my people, my world." (The Passionate Life, P.209)

God's partisanship, God's passionate and vulnerable love for people is in the heart and on the lips of a very young woman, frightened, confused, overwhelmed by her unlikely pregnancy, yet confident that the child to be born of her will convey God's love with a power to save his people. Those who are offended by her words, those who have no need, will not notice the birth much. Those who know their need, their poverty and hunger, will probably be found weeping tears of joy and gratitude again this year.

John Steinbeck borrowed the title for his novel from the opening lines of King Richard, III:

"Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this
Sun of York."

That's it. That's a paraphrase of the Good News: the Gospel of God in Mary's strong Magnificat....

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made summer by this Son --
This child who will be called holy,
This Son of God.
Amen.

Lord God, may we be big enough to know our smallness... May we be strong enough to know our weakness. Make us so whole, that we affirm our incompleteness: Make us so rich in wisdom that we happily confess our poverty. God of vulnerable love who came among us so modestly, quietly, give us courage to know and to confess our need -- for the love of one another -- and for you. Come, Lord Jesus -- abide with us.

And to you be all
Praise and glory and wisdom
And Thanksgiving and honor
And power and strength
And to our God for ever and ever.
Amen